



School Safety Newsletter

Volume 5, Issue 7

February 2018

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting Victims

CNN, February 15, 2018

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/15/us/florida-shooting-victims-school/index.html>



*Protecting our
future through
information
sharing*

In This Issue

- Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting Victims
- For years, Schools Tried To Get Help for Accused Florida Shooter Nikolas Cruz
- Next Monthly Webinar - March 7, 2018
- Grandmother Thwarted Washington School Shooting By Looking At Student's Journal, Cops Say
- Parents: You Follow Your Teen on Instagram, But Do You Know About Their Finsta?
- 2 Texas Principals Arrested For Failing to Report Sexual Abuse Allegations
- Former NYC Teacher, Brother Accused of Trying to Build Bombs, Paying Students to Disassemble Fireworks

For Years, Schools Tried To Get Help For Accused Florida Shooter Nikolas Cruz

Tim Craig, Emma Brown, Sarah Larimer, and Moriah Balingit, February 19, 2018

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2018/02/19/for-years-schools-tried-find-help-for-florida-shooting-suspect-nikolas-cruz/WnXemxzEZkSjV6olgOpkLJ/story.html>

PARKLAND, Fla. — The real problems started at least as early as middle school and quickly intensified. There were the vocal outbursts, disturbing drawings of stick figures with guns, constant disciplinary issues. There were threatening statements written on his homework, including a reference to killing President Obama, saying he should be “burned alive and eaten.”

Some teachers banned Nikolas Cruz from their classrooms at Westglades Middle School because of his erratic behavior. One teacher said he was barred from bringing a backpack to the school and security had to search him to ensure he didn’t have weapons. Teachers were very concerned about him and were working to get him help.

“Looking in his eyes, he just looked like there was a problem,” said a teacher who worked with Cruz in sixth grade. “His behavior in class wasn’t constantly wrong, but every once in a while, it was. He would just spew something out of his mouth that was inappropriate.”

“I can say I was so uncomfortable around him, I did not want to be alone with him in my classroom,” said one former teacher, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the topic. “That is how disruptive his behavior was.”

One year, when Cruz was in middle school, he racked up numerous infractions — including for a fight during the second week of school and continuing with a pattern of unruly behavior, insults, and profanity, according to disciplinary records obtained by WPLG-TV in Miami.

Teachers said that by eighth grade Cruz was lashing out physically, randomly bumping other students in the hallways appearing to want to pick confrontations and fights and at times breaking out into profanity-laced tirades without any apparent trigger.

“Something would just upset him, and he would just do it and come to class and act out,” said one teacher. His homework scrawls got more troublesome, including repeated tirades against American society, the comment about Obama, and other writings teachers found alarming. He put a swastika on a test. He wrote about his intense interest in, and support for, guns.

Middle school and high school teachers referred Cruz to individual and family counseling, the records show. They held parent conferences and called social workers. They sent him to in-school suspension, and they sent him off campus. For a time, they sent him to a school for emotionally disturbed youth. Finally, after he was disciplined for an assault at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, they asked for an assessment of the threat he posed to his school, and ultimately he was expelled, about a year before he returned with a gun.

A person familiar with the records confirmed their authenticity, and interviews with teachers, administrators, and those who knew Cruz — along with other records and accounts — show that he was well-known to school and mental health authorities, and was entrenched in the process for getting students help rather than referring them to law enforcement.

It is unclear how complete the records are, and a Broward County schools spokeswoman said she could not comment on them due to “student privacy rules.”

Instead of slipping through the cracks, it appears Cruz was the target of aggressive work to help put him on the right track. But it also appears he might have hit the limit of what could be done.

Teachers worked “very, very, very hard” to get Cruz to a school center that would help him address his issues, said the sixth-grade teacher, who noted that Cruz’s now-deceased mother also understood his problems and wanted to get him help. But that process took years, the teacher said, and required loads of paperwork to back up Cruz’s needs.

“We do, as teachers, everything that we possibly can to help these children, we truly do,” the teacher said. “And it’s a

Monthly Webinars!

First Wednesday
of Every Month

at 10 am

(Except January,
July, and
August).

Next Webinars

Wednesday,
March 7, 2018

Each webinar has a
round table
discussion at the
end. Questions are
always welcome!

To participate, you
must be a vetted
member. For more
information please
email
schoolsafety@isp.
state.il.us

For Years, Schools Tried To Get Help For Accused Florida Shooter Nikolas Cruz **(Continued)**

process. It's a big process. You have to have just so much information, which we did on him, we had so much."

Cruz's past interactions with the Broward County schools have come into increasing focus since the shooting Wednesday, when he took an Uber to his former high school, walked inside, and allegedly started firing into a series of classrooms on two floors, killing 17 people, many of them teenagers. A school official, on notice that he could pose a danger, immediately raised concerns with other staff upon seeing him approach, but it was too late.

Howard Finkelstein, the Broward County public defender representing Cruz, has decried the shooting as avoidable, emphasizing all of the red flags that were missed in his client's life, including at school, in the mental health system and with the FBI, which failed to investigate a tip last month that Cruz seemed capable of violence and might shoot up a school.

"What we have gathered so far looks to us like this is a complete multi-system failure, that you had the school system failed . . . you had the mental health system failed," Finkelstein said. "When he went to purchase a gun, that system failed. . . . The FBI failed. When you look at it, this should never have happened."

Broward Schools Superintendent Robert Runcie declined to comment on Cruz's disciplinary past, but he said he is reviewing how the case was handled.

"There's always more that you could do, or could have done, but the fact is that there's more that the federal leadership and government could do," Runcie said in an interview. "They could put resources and make priority investments so that we can properly service these students who are disengaged or have mental health issues. That's what could have been done better."

Runcie said that while the district has a responsibility to ensure student safety, it cannot fall solely on a school district to handle mental illness.

"We need greater investments in mental health, social emotional services for our kids," Runcie said. "It's not just a school district problem. We can't solve every problem."

According to federal data, the district had about 580 counselors during the 2015-16 school year, or about one counselor for every 462 students. The American School Counselor Association recommends one counselor for every 250 students.

While the school system falls short, it still has a far lower student to counselor ratio than most school districts in the United States.

Broward County schools once recorded more in-school arrests than any other Florida school system. But that harsh approach fell out of favor amid concerns that it was funneling too many young people, and particularly black and Hispanic students, into the juvenile justice system. Cruz is listed on official documents as being white.

In recent years, Broward schools became a leader in the national move toward a different kind of discipline, one that would not just punish students but would help them address the root causes of their misbehavior. Such policies aim to combat what is known as the "school to prison pipeline," giving teenagers a chance to stick with their education rather than get derailed, often permanently, by criminal charges.

Beginning in 2013, Broward stopped referring students to police for about a dozen infractions ranging from alcohol and drug use to bullying, harassment, and assault. Instead, students who get in trouble for those infractions are offered an alternative program that emphasizes counseling, conflict resolution skills, and referral to community social service agencies.

Jonathon Fishman, spokesman for the Broward Sheriff's Office, said last week that he had no record of deputies arresting Cruz before Wednesday.

As a result, Broward has seen a dramatic decline in the number of students who are arrested at school. In 2011-12, Broward recorded 1,056 school-based arrests, By 2015-16, that number had fallen 63 percent to just 392 school-based arrests.

The Obama administration held up Broward's transformed discipline system as a national model, inviting Runcie to speak about the district's approach in 2015.

For Years, Schools Tried To Get Help For Accused Florida Shooter Nikolas Cruz (Continued)

Cruz's school records and interviews indicate that he was getting into trouble around the time of the policy shift.

One former middle school teacher said Cruz stood out in his mind among his problem students. He recalled "just him being very much a loner" and "erratic behaviors" that often disrupted his class. Sometimes, the former teacher said, Cruz would get up and start dancing around.

"At the time I never felt like he was a physical threat, but we knew that there was definitely deep issues," he said.

Teachers started pressing school administrators to have Cruz transferred to Cross Creek School, a K-12 public school for students with emotional and behavior disabilities that offers intensive psychiatric counseling. But one of Cruz's former teachers said the referral process into Cross Creek was agonizingly slow, complicated by a lack of classroom space and cumbersome state procedures for officially designating a student as a potential threat to himself or others.

"It's very hard to get a kid in there, very hard," the teacher said. "I don't know why, but I suspect it comes down to money. . . . So for three-fourths of the year, he went untreated at school."

In February 2014, Cruz was transferred to Cross Creek. In January 2016, after about two years at Cross Creek, he transferred to Douglas High School. It's not clear why he left Cross Creek, a small school tailored for his needs, for a sprawling comprehensive high school of more than 3,000 students.

At Douglas, Cruz got into trouble four times during the first half of the 2016-17 school year — for fighting, insults, and profanity. In September 2016, after a fight, Cruz was referred to social workers. A week later, the Department of Children and Families opened an investigation.

That agency found that in the aftermath of a breakup with his girlfriend, Cruz — who had been diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and autism — was depressed and cutting himself, according to a confidential summary of the investigation. Cruz was interested in buying a gun, the investigators found. Even so, they concluded he was a low risk for harm.

School officials, who knew Cruz well, appeared to challenge that notion, according to the report. They had noticed an abrupt change in Cruz's behavior after the breakup. The counselors had received reports not only that he was cutting himself, but also that he had drawn a Nazi symbol on his bookbag. School counselors raised concerns that it would be "premature" to conclude that Cruz was stable enough not to be hospitalized. A counselor who worked with Cruz at the time declined to comment when reached Saturday.

In January 2017, when Cruz was disciplined for an alleged assault, that triggered a call for a threat assessment, a formal process by which the school determines whether a student is dangerous and how that student should be supervised and supported.

Three weeks after the call for the threat assessment, Cruz transferred to an alternative high school. It's not clear whether the assessment was conducted, what its findings were, or how those findings translated into any intervention.

The shooting has been "devastating" to Cruz's sixth-grade teacher, who said she has former students among the dead, and also has taught siblings of the victims.

"It's too hard. It's too much. It's awful what he did," she said, her voice breaking. "And the only reason I'm talking to you is because people need to know that it shouldn't be this hard to get someone the help they need."

Grandmother Thwarted Washington School Shooting By Looking at Student's Journal, Cops Say

Fox News, February 15, 2018

<http://www.foxnews.com/us/2018/02/15/grandmother-thwarted-washington-school-shooting-by-looking-at-students-journal-cops-say.html>

A student in Washington state was arrested Tuesday after his grandmother called authorities to report "upcoming and credible threats" of a plot in his journal to attack a high school after flipping a coin, officials said.

The Everett Police Department said in a news release the grandmother contacted authorities around 9:30 a.m. and showed police excerpts of the journal, which "detailed plans to shoot students and use homemade explosive devices at ACES High School." Officers were also told by the grandmother that 18-year-old Joshua Alexander O'Connor had a rifle stored in a guitar case, which she discovered after reading the journal.

"That would have probably been one of the hardest calls she has probably ever made, but I think that the content of the journal and some of the other evidence in the house was enough that she was alarmed enough," Everett Police Officer Aaron Snell told Q13 News.

Grandmother Thwarted Washington School Shooting By Looking at Student's Journal, Cops Say (Continued)

Authorities arrested O'Connor at the school, where he was found carrying marijuana and a knife. During his arrest, the student managed to slip one of his hands out of the handcuffs and tried to run from police, kicking an officer during the attempted escape.

Detectives later executed a search warrant on the grandmother's house, where he lived and where they seized the journal, a rifle, "military styled inert grenades and other evidentiary items," according to the release.

According to court documents obtained by Q13 News, O'Connor wrote about which high school he would target after flipping a coin. He then wrote that the school, ACES High School located about 30 miles north of Seattle, "won" the toss.

"I'm preparing myself for the school shooting. I can't wait. My aim has gotten much more accurate... I can't wait to walk into that class and blow all those f_____ away," an entry in the journal read, according to the court documents.

The 18-year-old also wrote he wanted the death count to be as high as possible so that the shooting would be infamous, according to court papers obtained by The Daily Herald. His journal entries included details about making pressure-cooker bombs, activating inert grenades and deploying explosives for maximum casualties, court papers said.

"I need to make this count," O'Connor wrote. "I've been reviewing many mass shootings/bombings (and attempted bombings) I'm learning from past shooters/bombers mistakes."

Another entry in the journal described an armed robbery of a convenience store that police believe O'Connor participated in Monday night. Police said O'Connor admitted to the robbery, telling them he felt powerful during the course of the crime, according to Q13 News. The rifle from the store robbery was the same found in the guitar case at the grandmother's house.

Cash from the robbery was supposed to help fund the school shooting, deputy prosecutor Andrew Alsdorf said in court. The 18-year-old has been booked into the Snohomish County Jail on charges of attempted murder, robbery and assault on an officer, according to jail records. He has yet to be formally charged in connection with the alleged school shooting plot.

During a court hearing on Wednesday, public defender Rachel Forde noted the gun and the grenade shells were legal to possess, adding that "musings and ventings" in O'Connor's journal weren't enough evidence to support a charge of attempted murder.

A judge still found probable cause to hold O'Connor in jail on the three felony counts, with bail set at \$5 million.

School officials on Wednesday said the grandmother set the perfect example for preventing a possible tragedy, the same day a former student killed 17 people at a high school in South Florida.

"The best defense against this kind of thing, the school shooting is, that if you hear something or see something is tell authorities. And that's exactly what she did," Mukilteo School District spokesperson Andy Muntz told Q13 News. "I know it had to have been really hard for her to do that, to turn in her grandson like that. But she quite honestly probably saved a lot of lives including her grandson."

Parents: You Follow Your Teen on Instagram, But Do You Know About Their Finsta?

Today Show, October 17, 2017 [Excerpt]

To read the whole article, view: <https://www.today.com/parents/parents-you-know-about-instagram-do-you-know-finsta-t117541>

While we've been hearting their perfectly filtered selfies on Instagram, teens have been busy populating their alternate, fake Instagram, or "Finsta," with content that ranges from utterly silly to unapologetically rebellious to unabashedly real. These accounts usually are associated with a clever pseudonym and bio line, different than their real Instagram (what they refer to as "Rinsta"). The accounts are locked, or set to private, so that audiences are more exclusive, usually a niche group of friends. Some teens have multiple Finstas, a way to connect with different friend groups.

The obvious reason teens have a Finsta is to get away from prying parents. And while their usage of it varies, it's clear they use it to show a different side of themselves. For some, it's a side where mischievous or illegal behavior (think expletives and red Solo cups) is center stage. For some, it's the silly side they only want close friends to see. For some, it's a more vulnerable side (think makeup-free and sweatpants). For all, it's a side they don't want certain entities — including colleges, sororities, future employers — to see.

Ultimately, using Finsta is a way for teens to manage their own personal PR campaign. And they are pretty savvy at it. They can control the picture-perfect profile they show on real Instagram while sharing their "this-is-the-real-me" personality on Finsta.

2 Texas Principals Arrested For Failing To Report Sexual Abuse Allegations

Fox News, February 8, 2018

<http://www.foxnews.com/us/2018/02/08/2-texas-principals-arrested-for-failing-to-report-sexual-abuse-allegations.html>

Two elementary school principals at a Texas school district were arrested within a week of each other for failing to report cases of

2 Texas Principals Arrested For Failing To Report Sexual Abuse Allegations (Continued)

sexual abuse to law enforcement.

Cindy Sue Underwood, 35, the principal of Kate Haynes Northwest Academy was booked into the Wichita County jail on Monday and released soon after.

Kory Fancher Dorman, 45, the principal of Crocket Elementary school was arrested last week.

Both educators were charged with failing to report separate and unrelated incidents of sexual abuse concerning students in their care.

The Wichita Fall Times Record News reported Underwood was arrested for failing to tell police a school iPad was used by three 6-year-old boys to take photos as they engaged in various sexual acts in a classroom.

According to the arrest warrant, the photos were taken on Oct. 3 and were reportedly found on Oct. 25 by the students' homeroom teacher.

The teacher informed Underwood of the findings. She told the parents, but did not alert law enforcement.

The children were sent home, which detectives said put others at risk.

Dorman was arrested Jan. 31 for allegedly not reporting a sexual assault of a first grader at her school.

According to the arrest warrant, Dorman was notified by three grandparents in mid-December that their 7-year-old grandson was sexually assaulted by a fellow 6-year-old student while in a bathroom at Crockett elementary school. It's unclear when the assault occurred.

Dorman told authorities that she delegated the responsibility of investigating the allegations to the school counselor. She did not report the allegations to law enforcement and was unaware that anyone had reported the incident after they returned from the holidays about 20 days later.

Both Underwood and Dorman were put on administrative leave by Wichita Falls ISD district officials on Friday.

The Texas Family Code states that teachers are mandatory reporters.

In a statement, the Wichita Falls ISD superintendent said the "safety and security" of students are a "top priority."

"The staff and administrators in WFISD entered into the education field because of their love for children and their desire to do what's right by them," Michael Kuhrt said in a statement shared on the district's social media on Monday.

He continued: "In light of these recent allegations, please know that WFISD will be reviewing its protocol and training for reporting suspected abuse."

Former NYC Teacher, Brother Accused of Trying to Build Bombs, Paying Students to Disassemble Fireworks

NBC New York, February 15, 2018

https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Mayor-de-Blasio-NYPD-FBI-Significant-Investigation-New-York-City-474227893.html?_osource=SocialFlowTwt_NYBrand

A former teacher at a Bronx school stockpiled bomb making materials and paid students to break down fireworks to extract gunpowder for the explosives, authorities say.

Christian Toro and his brother, Thomas Toro, was arrested by the FBI Thursday morning. Details on the investigation will be announced at a news conference held by the mayor, the NYPD and the FBI at NYPD headquarters Thursday evening.

News 4 will stream the press conference live at 8 p.m. (Check back here to watch.)

Christian and his brother Tyler Toro had been making firearms since last October, according to a criminal complaint obtained by News 4.

Christian Toro was a teacher at a high school in Harlem, where, on December 4, 2017, a bomb threat was called in and a student was later arrested for the threat. Toro resigned from the school shortly afterward, authorities said.

After he resigned, his brother Tyler returned Christian's school-issued laptop to the school. A technical specialist there found copy of a book providing instructions on how to assemble bombs.



Mia Ray Langheim
School Intelligence
Officer

School Safety Newsletter

Statewide Terrorism &
Intelligence Center
2200 S. Dirksen Parkway
Springfield, IL 62703
Phone: 217-558-2661
E-Mail:
Schoolsafety
@isp.state.il.us